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ABSTRACT

Teaching Black English as a foreign language can improve communication between individuals and enrich the language patterns of Standard English. Essential areas of study in such a course (vocabulary, grammar, translation, and to some extent, environmental exposure) can be programmed on a computer. In fact, a computer supplies the perfect tool for instruction because it can be constantly changed to accommodate new information. Further, a computer-aided approach eliminates the need for a strictly controlled classroom setting and provides the opportunity for extending the university-without-walls concept. Although a 2741 teletype terminal linked to an IBM 360-50 proved useful for a course in Black English at the University of California at Riverside, different computer systems and languages (such as PLATO) may be more efficient for other instructional situations. If the cost of equipment is prohibitive, conventional language laboratories can be used as effective facilities for instruction. (KS)

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"Computerizing Blacklish"

Not too long ago, my wife told me she had had a slight misunderstanding with a "box boy" at our local grocery store. She had thought the person had said he was going to Florida, whereas he had actually asked whether she wanted the groceries on the floor or the seat. Neither spoke nor understood the dialect of the other very well.

The problem my wife had, I have had the same problem as well, is not unusual in our society. Misunderstanding is the bane of all those who use language, from the child to the parent, from the employee to the employer, from the student to the teacher. Many misunderstandings cannot be helped. They are intentional and serve the purposes of the perpetrators. But those misunderstandings that are unintentional, that we might alleviate through education, problems such as my wife had, such as I have had, are the subject of this paper.

Frequently we hear from educated as well as uneducated people that speakers of Black English do not speak grammatical English. They use double negatives, drop endings, use slang, and pronounce words in such a way that no one can understand them. However surprising to a person not involved in teaching, it should not now be surprising to a teacher that Blacks do use a grammatical system that expresses very well the ideas

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they wish to express. Their pronounciation is no more difficult to follow than "Cockney English" to use a model foreign to most of us. The major problem we as teachers confront when dealing with Black English is that we do not understand it, either, by supervisors, businessmen, salespeople, etc. One solution that has been offered by various educators is to help speakers of Black English become bi-lingual or bi-dialectal. Then all of us would be able to understand our students, employees, customers, etc.

Certainly this proposal would solve the problem of misunderstanding; I doubt that it would do anything very much for another problem: the validity of Black English as "a separate but equal" dialect. To borrow from the comedian Rodney Dangerfield, Black English "don't get no respect" if all speakers of Black English must learn to be bi-dialectal. Such a solution would only confirm speakers of "Standard English" in their belief that Black English is an inferior dialect--one not worth knowing because all speakers of Black English are forced to learn the "Standard" dialect.

But whether we could magically make all speakers of Black English bi-dialectal or whether we would want to, we would make our language poorer, because speakers of "Standard English" would not be in contact with a vital source of enrichment for our language. It would be far better to help some speakers of "Standard English" (notably teachers, etc.) become bi-dialectal. Certainly, it should be easier for the teacher to learn the students' dialect, for the supervisor to learn the employees'

dialect, than to reverse the process. Specifically in terms of education, teachers of English should make every effort to learn Black English. First, such a knowledge is important in understanding the students. Second, only through the ability to help the student become aware of the grammatical system he or she is using can the teacher hope to help the student learn a new system.

The approach of which I speak is to teach Black English as though it were a foreign language. Through such a method, I hope that we may be able to avoid the negative interference that usually occurs when we discuss dialects other than standard. A computer-aided approach can be extremely helpful. First, CAI can be used by anyone at anytime the system is running. Ideally terminals would be available around the campus so that a person could make use of spare time to learn a lesson in Black English. Further, CAI opens the opportunity for extending the university without walls concept. Black English can be taught without the framework of a strictly controlled course. The computer can keep track of those who take the course and they can be billed after the course has been completed. (For the purposes of cost-effectiveness, the computer can charge according to time used with a maximum cut-off in time and money.)

I have used CAI before and have found it quite effective. At the University of California at Riverside, we engaged in an experiment with CAI to teach remedial grammar for remedial students. We used grammar programs developed at Golden West College

by Ms. Anna Marie Thames. Her programs were designed for remedial students at an open admissions junior college, for students who had failed in remedial classes before. Her success had been notable. Ours was also worthwhile. We experimented with a format that was more structured than necessary. Some twenty students who had scored below 550 on the CEEB test were scheduled in our experimental section of English Subject A. Through drill and practice handled by the CAI programs coupled with a seminar taught by a teacher, the students learned what most would call remedial English. At the end of the quarter we evaluated the program and felt it to be successful. (See my description of the experiment in the October 1974 issue of System.)

The most heartening part of the experiment was that the students enjoyed using the computer. The opportunity CAI supplied them--they could work whenever they wanted without a teacher being present--made them more interested in learning than they had been in some time. As they said, they like doing something. As a result of our experiment, we went on to develop some programs in the use of the colon and the semi-colon, two punctuation marks that few choose to teach, but that students do not mind learning if they can do it with a computer (See attachments for programs.).

There is little reason why the computer cannot be used to teach Black English. At the University of California, Riverside, we used a 2741 teletype terminal linked to an IBM 360-50. Costs vary from school to school, but our costs were inexpensive

in comparison with instructional costs for science courses that require laboratory use. We paid $5.00/hr. for "Q" time on a time-sharing basis. Terminal rental was $68.50 per terminal per month. Perhaps the greatest cost lies in development time, and here a prospective user of CAI (whether of this program or others) must calculate what kind of system, language, capability, etc. he or she wants. We used APL, a sophisticated language that handles an interactive mode of question and response in script very well. We could arrange fall through devices and a whole panoply of layers in our program with APL.

However, various problems arise with the use of APL. Its sophistication almost necessitates the use of a full time programmer to be cost-effective. At UCR we were fortunate to hire such a programmer, who not only knew APL very well, but could communicate with both me and my ir ormant. We paid him $3.00/hr., and it was only his dedication to the Statistics Dept. at UCR that kept him from a very lucrative job at IBM. Another inducement we had for using APL was that we wished to match programs with programs supplied us by Ms. Anna Marie Thames of Golden West College.

Certain problems result from the use of our system. Hard copy of every part of the student's use of the instructional module is wasteful of paper and time. A CRT can work just as effectively if augmented with either of two auxiliary devices: either the teacher prepares dittoes in advance and has the lab assistant give them out after the CAI exercise, or the system

can have a 3270 (or some variation thereof) with hard copy capability.

The more sophisticated the system, however, the more expensive the instructional costs per student per hour. A possibility we considered at UCR was to buy a mini-computer comparable to the PDP-12 or 14 with the capability of handling some 15 to 20 remote terminals and devoted exclusively to CAI. Such a system would have handled the instructional design we had, but would have required some re-writing of our programs. We did not have the opportunity to experiment, however. Instead, the UC system decided to develop a network with load-shunting devices with major priority given to research.

A further possibility in programming, and one that should be considered by any school interested in programming such a system would be to consider the amount of money for research and development available to the professor or team designing the instructional package. In my case, I had a terminal in my office, a programmer, and an informant. Further, APL ran every afternoon and our access was never restricted. But without such luxuries and without a package I wanted to match I believe it would have been more feasible to use a language such as Coursewriter which can be used in a fairly sophisticated fashion fairly soon by most academics. Again, costs must be calculated: development time (a rough figure is 75 hours development time for every hour of instructional time), terminal rental (both for development and for student use), computer time, and so on. Frequently "deals" can be worked out with the campus computer center to arrange for some free development time. But this,

as all other features, varies from campus to campus.

An ideal system would incorporate the following features: a CHT with hard copy capability. Students could have the speed and ease of using a CRT for those parts of the exercise that does not require a permanent record. Further, with either the PLATO system or with the new IBM terminals quadrants of the screen can be used to imitate a "Sesame-Street" learning situation. The terminal should also have a hard-copy capability for those parts of the exercise that need to be saved or that supply homework drill for successive lessons. In addition we should take the lead of the various medical schools that incorporate such features as "talking patients"--in case, tape-recorded conversations of Black people using vocabulary words and grammatical constructions that occur in the lessons. With a 35mm slide projector and a small screen the lesson can be coupled with properly stimulating pictures of the environment in which such conversations occur. The complete system, computer run, would be expensive. But the advantage of the computer-aided instructional system is that it is like a sophisticated single-lens reflex camera--components can be added as one develops programs and finds sources of funding.

But the inability to afford all the components need not deter one from starting. For example, in place of the computer run tape-recorder it is quite possible to use the language lab. And, in a period that sees the elimination of language requirements, such use of the language lab can justify sufficiently sophisticated equipment that will benefit both the foreign

language departments and those teaching other dialects of English. To illustrate what I mean: it is very easy to couple language instruction in its traditional mode (audio-tapes) with such features as video-tape re-enactments of Black situations that will go a long way toward supplying more than the words of the dialect. It is not difficult to develop such facilities in most language labs. Carrels face a central point. A screen can be rigged so that individual students can see the screen. Of course, it may be necessary to limit use of part of the lab or certain hours to those who are studying Black English (or whatever other dialect the instructor wishes to teach). But the problems of scheduling at this level are solvable. For that matter, Black English can be taught without the computer if the school does not deem it economically feasible to develop such CAI programs as I have outlined. With a language laboratory alone the program can be developed. The major problem in this, as in all other areas of instructional design, is two-fold: the will to be a "Yankee-pedlar" and to jerry-rig existing equipment, and the time and incentive to dream.

A course in Black English taught as a foreign language should incorporate the following items: Vocabulary, Grammar, and translation. All of these areas can be programmed on a computer. In fact, a computer supplies the perfect tool for such courses because it can be constantly changed to accomodate new information such as vocabulary. Reading exercises may cause some trouble, although a CRT with appropriate pictures to aid meaning flashed on various quadrants can be developed.

Grammar is perhaps the easiest to teach. Practice can be facilitated through the drill procedure on the computer but without the sense of tedium students experience with programmed texts.

Our instructional outline incorporates the following items:

I. Vocabulary: Vocabulary lists and sample sentences. Vocabulary should be developed locally through the use of informants. Practice sessions stress use in sentences. Should be coupled with audio tapes. (CAI can be helpful in storing and retreiving words.)

II. Grammar: Demonstration of rules used in Black English with practice using and/or identifying rules in sample Black English sentences. An informant should be used in developing these sentences. They should correlate as well as possible with vocabulary. (For a sample session see attachments demonstrating analogous use with colon.)

III. Reading: Probably best here to try the following technique: tape-record conversations of native speakers. Reproduce conversations for reading practice. Use audio-tapes for verbal practice.

IV. "Environmental Exposure": Here is one of the more difficult components. Hopefully we will be able to video-tape situations in which Black English is used. Situations would include home, street corners, etc.

Our efforts are now in a mixed stage of development. We have existing programs to handle some of the components (I have attached a complete set of programs for the Colon to show how to program for an interactive mode, and a sample owrking of the colon program). Further, our instructional design is fairly well set and we are collecting information in the various categories outlined in the preceeding pages. However, we are

currently prevented from doing any further programming because Wichita State University is debating whether to expand its present facilities or to provide new and different capabilities such as PLATO.